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SUBJECT: S/E MITCHELL RULES OUT FORCED NATURALIZATION OF PALESTINIANS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell affirmed to Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and Foreign Minister Ali Chami that the U.S. opposes the forced naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon under any circumstance. During his January 19-20 visit to Beirut, S/E Mitchell also reiterated that no regional peace deal would come at the expense of Lebanon. All of his Lebanese interlocutors highlighted the importance of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal to the stability of the rest of the region. Sleiman and Berri, in particular, criticized Israel's perceived lack of commitment to stability in the region and argued for continued U.S. support to the Lebanese Armed Forces. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams assessed that Israeli withdrawal from northern Ghajar in Lebanon could be a catalyst for advancing other regional initiatives, but cautioned that either "we move forward or we move backwards; a decision has to be made." Lebanese interlocutors again raised concerns about new Transportation Security Administration guidelines and H.R. 2278. (Special Envoy Mitchell's conversation with PM Hariri is reported septel.) End Summary.

S/E MITCHELL: U.S. DOES NOT SUPPORT TAWTEEN

¶2. (C) Special Envoy Mitchell reassured President Sleiman, Speaker Berri and FM Chami that the U.S. would not conclude any regional peace agreement at the expense of Lebanon. S/E Mitchell reiterated that Lebanon was a valued ally and friend of the U.S. and the U.S. would continue its full support for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. To that end, S/E Mitchell expressly confirmed that the U.S. would not support the forced naturalization ("tawteen") of Palestinians in Lebanon. (Note: S/E Mitchell first raised U.S. opposition to tawteen with PM Hariri. End note.) This issue, he said, would be for the GOL to decide. Sleiman and Chami responded positively to these assurances and thanked the U.S. for its continued support. Speaker Berri, in contrast, said that while he appreciated the U.S. position, it would have no bearing on how Lebanon's 18 recognized sectarian groups would seek consensus among themselves for how to deal with the status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN AGREEMENT NECESSARY FOR REGION

¶3. (C) Sleiman, Berri and Chami agreed that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the most important item on the regional agenda to maintain stability. Sleiman encouraged U.S. leadership and persistence to get the parties to reach an agreement. S/E Mitchell advised that this was exactly his mandate and, complexities notwithstanding, the most important next step was to have the sides return to negotiations. He advised that the U.S. had adopted Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's position that

the issue of borders should be the first issue to be discussed. However, the current challenge was to have both sides commit to restart talks, even if they begin at lower levels.

¶4. (C) Speaker Berri reported that when Abbas visited Beirut in late December, Abbas was "humiliated" because of Israel and worried about Arab public opinion. S/E Mitchell acknowledged that both Abbas and PM Netanyahu had experienced personal setbacks in their efforts, but emphasized that the current environment was not sustainable for Israel, the Palestinians, or the region. Once a Palestinian state came into existence, it must be viable and sustainable from the first day, S/E Mitchell continued. To that end, the U.S. is pursuing the "bottom-up" track in parallel with the political track. FM Chami asserted that he was confident in the ability of the U.S. to move negotiations forward and that the region was counting on its efforts. Speaker Berri recalled that it was U.S. pressure on Israel that made the Madrid conference -- and later the Oslo Accords -- possible, and he deemed it critical that the U.S. apply similar pressure now.

GHAJAR

¶5. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams informed S/E Mitchell that Israeli withdrawal from northern Ghajar at the earliest opportunity could yield other positive results in the region. The status of Ghajar as Lebanese territory was indisputable and Israel had virtually "abandoned" the territory in 2000 when it first withdrew, Williams reasoned. He urged S/E Mitchell to encourage Israel

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to withdraw once again, as it would be an easy confidence-building measure, especially because Ghajar does not represent any political obligations or debts to be paid from the Israeli domestic point of view. However, not withdrawing from Ghajar or continued delay in doing so has spillover effects in other regional matters, Williams warned.

¶6. (C) Williams summarized that the Lebanese political context had changed significantly. The biggest change, he noted, was the improved bilateral relationship -- albeit still tentative -- between Lebanon and Syria. With the change in the political environment, some Lebanese politicians had "defected" from PM Hariri's camp and moved closer to Syria, Williams explained, but with little practical impact. However, Williams surmised that if Israel did not withdraw from Ghajar soon, it would weaken PM Hariri and strengthen the "ideology of resistance." On Ghajar, "we either move forwards or backwards now," he said. Other issues that would also impact regional peace efforts included the status of Shebaa Farms and continued Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory, Williams enumerated. Resolving Ghajar, though, could be a crucial, positive first step to dealing with the more difficult issues, he insisted.

LAF NEEDS CONTINUED SUPPORT

¶7. (C) S/E Mitchell congratulated President Sleiman for recently making his first trip to south Lebanon to visit the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and informed him that the U.S. would continue to support efforts of the GOL to exert its control over all Lebanese territory by providing needed resources to the LAF. Sleiman thanked the U.S. for its military assistance. He added that the LAF required more assistance to find an effective method to assert effective control along Lebanon's borders, and he explained that no one in Lebanon had the intention to enter a conflict with Israel. Hizballah's weapons would be a matter for discussion during the National Dialogue, Sleiman insisted. While he expressed concern over Hizballah's arsenal, Sleiman also raised concern that Israel actively took steps to prevent "a stable

Lebanon." He encouraged the U.S. to discuss with Syria ways to prevent further smuggling of weapons to both Hizballah and Palestinian groups, and he claimed the GOL would do the same.

TSA LIST AND H.R. 2278  
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18. (C) As they have done in a number of recent meetings with U.S. officials, S/E Mitchell's Lebanese interlocutors also raised their concerns about new Transportation Security Administration procedures that list Lebanon as a "country of concern" following the failed bomb attempt in the U.S. in late December. To assuage concerns, S/E Mitchell explained that TSA's policies were designed for the safety and protection of everyone entering the United States and in no way were targeted against Lebanon or the Lebanese people. The policies are constantly under review and changed according to the information available at that time, S/E Mitchell emphasized. Similarly, Sleiman, Berri and Chami expressed disappointment with U.S. House Resolution 2278, which would target satellite and other media providers if they distribute content deemed to incite violence against Americans. H.R. 2278 -- which would apply to Hizballah's radio and television outlets -- was contrary to freedom of the press and expression, they argued. S/E Mitchell responded that he would advise President Obama of their concerns.

19. (U) Special Envoy George Mitchell's staff has cleared this cable.

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